

For the third time in just two pages, Jesus sends out disciples to evangelize or to prepare villages and people for his coming. And this time, we are a little confused; we can make sense of the other two mission trips, but we wonder about this one. I think we can find the meaning behind this account, but only if we do not focus on the one thing we are most likely to focus on, these final verses, Jesus' instructions for those occasions when the people would not receive them: wipe their dust off your feet, and tell them- as though a curse upon them- that God's Kingdom has come near, and you have lost your chance, "more tolerable for Sodom" than for the town that rejects God's messengers. No, let's not focus on that, it gets our minds in the wrong place, so that we give ourselves permission to judge. And we'll see in a moment, later in the chapter, why we must never do that- can never judge and can never give up on people. Surely we believe, if we really consider the actions and the outcomes of our life, that God is the God of second chances. We know we would be lost if he were not.

The first sending, in chapter 9, where Jesus sends out the twelve disciples, is the most famous, a story told by Mark and Matthew as well; it has them going through all the villages of Galilee, "preaching the gospel and healing

everywhere”;and the most important factor in that reading is the power Jesus gave them to heal and his authority over demons. The second sending is a little more obscure, when Jesus was ready for his final journey to Jerusalem, and he sent out messengers to a village in Samaria to get the people there ready for his arrival.

And now the third. Where are the seventy going?Luke doesn't say, but there may be a couple of hints. That number, 70. Some scholars have found a universal reference in this number, as representative of the number of the nations in the world. Maybe that's little far-fetched- or maybe not. But then, note how Jesus calls his followers “lambs,”“lambs sent out among wolves”; and remember the prophecy of Isaiah, and a new age of God's “peaceable kingdom,” where the wolf and the lamb dwell together (Isaiah 11 and 65). So the lamb and wolf comparison is not a warning to the disciples of a dangerous world, but rather a call to understand their part in bringing into existence God's Kingdom on earth; to all the homes and towns that hear God's word of peace, that the Kingdom has come near. In this, the disciples- those meek lambs- obey the command of Jesus, to speak “Peace” to the people in all the places they travel.

And so, it appears that with this story, Luke anticipates the second part of his history, the book of Acts, and the going forth of the apostles and missionaries out

into the wide foreign world of strange cultures and pagan religions. At the beginning of Acts, just before Jesus ascends into the sky, he says that the Spirit will come and they will receive power, and that they will be his “witnesses in Jerusalem and in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Here in the gospel’s three missionary journeys, the disciples go first to their fellow Jews, and then, farther, to their religious half-brother Samaritans, and at last, into the outer Gentile world.

Let’s presume that this passage and Jesus’ instructions to the seventy were a message for the church, and so too, for us. How should we hear this word? We may be tempted to reply that if the world doesn’t respond to our preaching about the Lord, then we can just wipe off the dust of their ignorance and be done with them: “You had your chance, God’s Kingdom came to you, and you refused to believe.” And as good as it may make us feel, to obey and to have done our duty, it completely misses the point of this scripture. Jesus says nothing to the seventy about preaching, about teaching, about theology or doctrine or church work. He implies rather, that we are merely workers bringing in the harvest that God provides; and says only this about the relationships missionaries should develop with the people they meet: speak “peace” to them, and heal the sick. Nothing more.

What does that mean for us? It takes us to the very foundational elements of the gospel, that God desires wholeness for every person, and fairness and equity and kindness among all people. Really, people do not need to hear sermons, or to understand all the mysteries, but they do need to see love and mercy being shared, need to sense that God and the people of God accept them as they are. And this: that the Messianic message of peace and healing is at the heart of connecting people in common cause and purpose so that even those of differing points of view may be joined together; and though there will be disagreements about faith and odd, radical interpretations of scripture, still we can be bound closely to one another; one people, united indivisibly, wishing hope and peace for each other, finding comfort together in our suffering, and finding fellowship along the paths our life journeys take.

Though we may be tempted just to wipe the dust from our feet, and walk away, let us listen to Jesus' response in later verses to the joyful return of the missionaries, "I saw Satan fall from heaven," he tells them. Can it be that simple, then: a message of peace and the practice of love and wholeness and acceptance, without all the rigor and the rigmarole of religion? We have seen how religions dispute and make war against one another, and justify prejudice and violence, but

by giving peace and healing, we create friendships and bind ourselves to each other- lambs and wolves!- so that instead of trying to be right, we strive to be compassionate and selfless. And that makes all the difference- it even defeats evil- makes it weak and makes it fall;so that the way of goodness succeeds, and the world is healed a little bit at a time, by one act of humble courage or by a single word of kindness that desires the best outcome for someone else. And thus people are brought together into community, and can share the happiness of life as God's people, God's Kingdom that has come near: the open and welcoming community of faith where we gather to worship God, and to live in peace and to be healed.

On TV yesterday was "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance," part of a John Wayne Independence Day Movie Weekend. And I caught the last half-hour of it, probably for the fifth or sixth time. It's in those last minutes that James Stewart, the first citizen of the territory now become a state-who served the people as governor, senator, ambassador- learned his fame was founded upon an untruth. And as he relates the story of that former time to a couple of old friends and the local newspaper editor, he says, "So now, you know the story, that it isn't true." And the editor answers him, "This is the West, Sir, and here, when the legend

becomes the fact, we print the legend.” And I think we accept those words without a second thought; that idea is part of our conception of “mythic” America and its destiny. But the quote made me wonder if that is the same way we see our faith- as legendary, perfectly settled in our minds, and unchangeable: here is the Bible, this is the way we believe, have always believed, an unchallenged fact that never needs re-examination. Truly, though, is that a healthy faith? Or should we find a new dawning of faith in the instructions of Jesus to the seventy missionaries, and see our call to service as *laborers* for God in this place and in this time, and not warriors: called to make peace where there is dissension and war, and to bring healing wherever there is sickness or hurt or fear, called to welcome all those that God loves? Let our faith take us even to difficult places, and let our faith teach us humility rather than certainty.